

receptacle have fallen below a predetermined par value or is empty and an operator has entered a proper authorization signal to remove a receptacle.

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141. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising sending a refill signal to a refill location when the contents of items in said receptacle have fallen below a predetermined par value.

IV. Please enter the enclosed formal drawings for Figures 1-27F into this application.

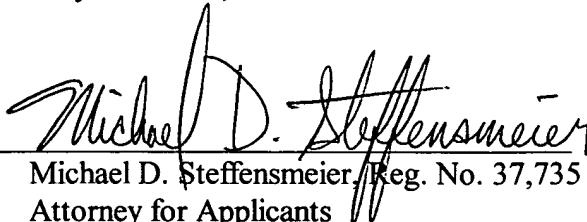
REMARKS

This is a continuation application of prior application Serial No. 09/087,388, filed May 29, 1998, now U.S. Patent No. 6,116,461, issued September 12, 2000 and prior application Serial No. 09,589,552, filed June 7, 2000, which will issue as U.S. Patent No. 6,338,007 on January 8, 2002. Applicant has cancelled the claims that have been allowed and issued in the parent applications and added new claims 95-141.

Please enter this Preliminary Amendment prior to calculating the filing fee. This continuation application contains claims 95-141.

Respectfully submitted,

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95. (new) An apparatus, comprising:

a receptacle adapted for removable placement in a dispensing machine, said receptacle having a lid that is adapted for movement between an open position and a closed position; said receptacle being individually removable from said dispensing machine; and

an information storage device secured to or in said receptacle for storing information relative to contents of said receptacle.

96. (new) The apparatus of claim 95, further comprising a communication contact on said receptacle enabling the transfer of information between said information storage device and an information source.

97. (new) The apparatus of claim 95, further comprising:

a processor within a portion of said receptacle; and
a latch in association with said lid, said latch adapted to be actuated by said processor to open said lid, upon said processor receiving said request signal from said dispensing machine.

98. (new) The apparatus of claim 97, wherein said request signal is generated by said dispensing machine when an operator enters identification information into said dispensing machine.

99. (new) The apparatus of claim 98, wherein said operator enters said identification information into said dispensing machine through one or more of the group consisting of a keypad or a bar code scanner in association with said dispensing machine.

100. (new) An apparatus, comprising:

a receptacle adapted for removable placement in a dispensing machine, said receptacle having a lid that is adapted for movement between an open position and a closed position, said receptacle being individually removable from said dispensing machine; and

a latch in association with said lid, said latch adapted to be actuated to open said lid when said latch receives a request signal from said dispensing machine.

101. (new) The apparatus of claim 100, wherein said latch includes a bimetallic actuator.

102. (new) The apparatus of claim 95, further comprising an engagement member adapted to engage a portion of said dispensing machine.

103. (new) The apparatus of claim 102 wherein said portion of said dispensing machine is a drawer in said dispensing machine.

104. (new) The apparatus of claim 102 wherein said engagement member is released from engagement with said portion of said dispensing machine upon said dispensing machine receiving a release signal.

105. (new) The apparatus of claim 95 wherein said receptacle is designed to enable it to be arranged with a plurality of other similarly designed receptacles in said dispensing machine.

106. (new) A method for dispensing items, comprising:

providing one or more receptacles adapted for removable placement on a dispensing structure, said receptacles having a plurality of side walls, a bottom adjoining to said side walls, and a top movably secured to at least one of said side walls such that the top is adapted for movement between an open position and a closed position, said receptacles being individually removable from said dispensing structure;

providing a dispensing structure adapted to receive said receptacles; placing said receptacles onto said dispensing structure; and providing a signal to said dispensing structure to cause one of said receptacles to open said top.

107. (new) The method of claim 106 wherein said dispensing structure is a drawer of an automatic medication dispensing machine.

108. (new) The method of claim 106 wherein said top includes a latch subassembly with a bimetallic actuator.

109. (new) The method of claim 106 further comprising said receptacle having a machine readable chip with contains information regarding said items.

110. (new) The method of claim 109 wherein said dispensing structure includes a communication port for communicating with said chip.

111. (new) The method of claim 110 wherein said dispensing structure is connected to a computer that captures data from said chip and which sends instructions to said chip.

112. (new) An assembly comprising:
an automated dispensing machine having at least one drawer;
a plurality of receptacles adapted to be placed in said at least one drawer, said receptacles each having a lid adapted for movement between an open position and a closed position, at least one of said receptacles being individually removable from said at least one drawer; and
an information storage device secured to or in each of said receptacles for storing information relative to contents of each of said receptacles.

113. (new) The assembly of claim 112, further comprising a communication contact on each of said receptacles enabling the transfer of information between said information storage device and an information source.

114. (new) The assembly of claim 113, wherein said automated dispensing machine is adapted to receive information from an operator and process a signal to one of said receptacles to cause one of said receptacles to open and enable said operator to remove at least a portion of the contents of said one of said receptacles.

115. (new) The assembly of claim 112, further comprising an engagement member on said receptacles to engage said at least one drawer.

116. (new) The assembly of claim 113, further comprising:
a plurality of engagement receiving members in said at least one drawer for engagement with said engagement member of said receptacles;
said engagement receiving members being individually actuatable to separately release one or more of said receptacles upon receiving a release signal from said automated dispensing machine.

117. (new) The assembly of claim 112 further comprising a data entry device in association with said automated dispensing machine to enable an operator to enter identification information.

118. (new) The assembly of claim 112 wherein said drawer is locked and cannot be unlocked without receiving an authorization code signal.

119. (new) The assembly of claim 112 wherein said dispensing machine includes a monitor adapted to display information relative to an operator's transaction with said dispensing machine.

120. (new) The assembly of claim 112 wherein each of said receptacles is adapted to download its contents information into a memory device of said automated dispensing machine.

121. (new) A method for the distribution of a plurality of items, comprising:
providing individual receptacles for said items, each of said receptacles including a plurality of side walls, a bottom adjoined to said side walls, and a top movably secured to at least one of said side walls, such that said top is adapted for movement between an open position and a closed position, said receptacles being individually removable from a dispensing machine, and an information storage device

secured to or in each of said receptacles for storing information relative to said items to be contained in said receptacles;

loading said items in individual ones of said receptacles and closing said top of said receptacles; and

inputting information relative to said items loaded into each of said receptacles into said information storage devices.

122. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising the step of providing an automated dispensing machine for dispensing said items.

123. (new) The method of claim 122, further comprising the step of entering information regarding said items in said receptacles into a memory of said automated dispensing machine.

124. (new) The method of claim 123, further comprising the steps of:

transporting said loaded receptacles to a receiving station at a location for distribution of said items; and

placing said loaded receptacles into said automated dispensing machine.

125. (new) The method of claim 124, further comprising the step of actuating one of said receptacles to open and expose its contents of items by entering required information into said automated dispensing machine.

126. (new) The method of claim 121 wherein one or more of said individual receptacles includes a communication contact on each of said receptacles enabling the transfer of information between said information storage device and an information source.

127. (new) . The method of claim 121 wherein said items are medical products for use or intake by patients in a health care facility.

128. (new) The method of claim 125, further comprising updating inventory information in said memory of said dispensing machine when contents of said receptacle are removed.

129. (new) The method of claim 128, further comprising automatically communicating said inventory information from said dispensing machine to a central computer remote from said dispensing machine.

130. (new) The method of claim 122, further comprising:
loading replacement receptacles with replenishment items;
transporting said replacement receptacles to said automated dispensing machine; and
removing one of said receptacles from said automated dispensing machine and replacing said removed receptacle with one of said replacement receptacles.

131. (new) The method of claim 126 wherein said entering of information regarding contents of said receptacles into said automated dispensing machine is accomplished by placing said receptacles into a docking station at said automated dispensing machine and porting data contained in said information storage device through said communication contact into a receiver port at said docking station.

132. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising storing receptacles at an inventory station until said items in said stored receptacles are needed to replenish said automated dispensing machine.

133. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising scanning bar code labels on packages of said items prior to said items being placed in individual ones of said receptacles.

134. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising:
providing a latch on each of said receptacles, said latch in contact with said top of each of said receptacles;
placing said receptacles in a drawer of said automated dispensing machine;
and
actuating said latch by sending an electronic signal from said automated dispensing machine to an engagement device within said drawer.

135. (new) The method of claim 121 further comprising:

providing a batch of packaged items;

selecting ones of said packaged items to be placed into individual ones of said receptacles; and

storing in said information storage device of each receptacle certain information regarding the packaged items placed into respective ones of said receptacles.

136. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising automatically maintaining inventory control information about the content of each of said receptacles.

137. (new) The method of claim 126, further comprising communicating operator entered information from said automated dispensing machine to respective ones of said receptacles through said communication contact of each receptacle and a respective one of communication ports in said automated dispensing machine in electronic communication with said communication contact.

138. (new) The method of claim 126, wherein said information source is one or more of the group consisting of a manufacturer's computer, a wholesaler's computer and a pharmacy computer.

139. (new) The method of claim 138, wherein said wholesaler's computer is connected remotely to said pharmacy computer to exchange drug inventory and distribution information and thereby enable said wholesaler to know when to ship additional drugs to said pharmacy.

140. (new) The method of claim 65 further comprising disengaging a receptacle from said automated dispensing machine when said processor senses that contents of items in said receptacle have fallen below a predetermined par value or is empty and an operator has entered a proper authorization signal to remove a receptacle.

141. (new) The method of claim 121, further comprising sending a refill signal to a refill location when the contents of items in said receptacle have fallen below a predetermined par value.